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Reagan's Double Take

While Ferdinand Marcos was stealing the Philippine election last week, Ronald Reagan was looking the other way. Ignoring the warnings of his own watchdogs, the president accused both sides of cheating and fatuously recommended that Corazon Aquino should cooperate with Marcos "to make sure the government works." The blunder was enormous. It seemed to give Marcos a green light to complete his theft and left a fragile opposition to conclude that it had been betrayed. Mrs. Aquino fumed in the Philippines, and editorial pages around the world took Reagan to task. Only then did the president do a tardy double take. Conceding that the elections had been marred by "widespread fraud," he finally admitted that the Marcos camp was largely to blame.

Hoping to cool everyone down, Reagan dispatched firefighter Philip Habib to Manila. His brief was to hold Marcos to old promises of reform and to urge patience on Mrs. Aquino. But the effort at damage control came dangerously late in the game. It did nothing to change the outcome of a manifestly crooked count: the National Assembly proclaimed Marcos the winner by 1.5 million comfortably padded votes. Mrs. Aquino had no intention of collaborating with the man who had cheated her. She proclaimed herself the victor, drew up plans for nonviolent civil disobedience—and took her case to the streets. "I feel like the young boy David prepared to face the giant Goliath," she told a rally in Manila's Luneta Park. "If Goliath refuses to yield, we shall . . . escalate."

The purloined election demonstrated weakness, not strength. A discredited autocrat spelled political and economic turmoil that could only help the communist insurgents of the New People's Army. The danger of bloodshed was real. "The documents for a state of emergency have already been typed," warned a Marcos aide. In one conciliatory gesture, Marcos announced that

Armed Forces Chief of Staff Fabian Ver, his chief enforcer, had resigned. But in reply to Reagan's scolding that "the election's credibility has been called into question," Marcos said, "He has been wrongly informed, and I intend to see to it that the correct information reaches him."

Ironically, Reagan's flip-flop damaged his own administration's measured campaign to get Marcos to clean up or step down. With rare unanimity, his professional strategists have concluded that Marcos has lost his grip and that the long-range strategic interests of the United States demand that someone with a credible mandate replace him. By pressing Marcos to call the election, U.S. officials had hoped to revive a centrist opposition, provide a political alternative to the Philippine communists and convince Marcos that he could not survive without giving in to reforms.

Avoiding blame: But conservative pragmatists within the White House—principally chief of staff Donald Regan—argued that the United States has little choice but to hold its nose and continue working with Marcos. Denouncing him, they argued, would hasten his downfall and hand Washington the blame. And while they would welcome his early departure, they worried about Aquino's call for what one official described as "French revolutionary justice." In addition, the argument ran, Mrs. Aquino has no experience in governing; her coalition may not hold together; and it is subject to subversion from the radical left.

Reagan apparently got himself into trouble by trying to straddle both lines of thought. After the election was over, Stephen Bosworth, the U.S. ambassador to the Philippines, cabled Washington with a recommendation that the United States denounce the vote as tainted; he was supported by the two principal architects of the new American Philippine policy, Under Secretary for Political Affairs Michael Armacost and Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Paul Wolfowitz.

But while leaning in that direction themselves, Secretary of State George Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger urged that Washington withhold its verdict while the results of the vote counting were still in doubt. "If we say the election's fraudulent, we give Marcos an excuse to declare the election invalid and give Aquino a blank check to go to the streets," insisted a senior White House aide. "But if we declare there *isn't* any fraud, we help radicalize the Aquino opposition at the very time we want to encourage it to stay working within the system." At first, however, Reagan seemed to listen with just one ear: in a Monday interview with The Washington Post he minimized the evidence of fraud and suggested that despite the election's shortcomings, it would be business as usual between Washington and Manila.

Systematic fraud: Shultz and other top foreign-policy advisers mounted a campaign to draw Reagan back to his basic policy of distancing himself from the faltering Marcos regime. The U.S. Embassy in Manila began compiling hundreds of pages of evidence, detailing systematic electoral fraud. In addition, Shultz placed a phone call to Richard Lugar, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the head of the administration's electoral observers, who was en route home from Manila. Lugar should attempt to persuade the president to remain wary of Marcos, Shultz suggested. When he met Reagan on Tuesday morning, Lugar stressed that the election had demonstrated "a real sentiment for democracy in the Philippines." Had the election been fair, he added, Aquino clearly would have won. Another member of the American delegation suggested to the president that there may have been some fraud on the part of the opposition, although he admitted that he didn't have any proof of the charge. After the meeting with Lugar, national-security adviser John Poindexter asked the CIA to take another look at the election.

In a document prepared for him by the State Department later that day, Reagan seemed to change his tone. The administration, he declared, was seriously disturbed by the reports of fraud and violence; the government of the Philippines needs "an authentic popular mandate." That was the line that Reagan was supposed to stick to in his Tuesday evening press conference, but instead, he seemed to absolve Marcos from his electoral sins. When the final vote was tabulated, he told his national audience, "we hope to have the same relationship with the people of the Philippines that we've had for all these historic years."

The president's waffling may well have reflected the positive impression he received when he attended Marcos's 1969 inauguration as an emissary of Richard

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Reagan's own prolixity last week won't make things any easier, even though he tried manfully to correct himself. Through the week, White House officials grew progressively more alarmed at the intensity of the reaction to Reagan's early slips. On Thursday, the CIA report confirmed that the election had been riddled with fraud. White House staffers prepared a turnabout statement, releasing it after the National Assembly had declared Marcos the winner. The delay only made feelings harder in the Philippines.

The snafu complicated the administration's approach to lobbying Congress for economic and military aid for the Philip-

pines. Reagan aides intend to argue that cutting off such assistance would eliminate what little leverage the United States has over Marcos and perhaps fatally weaken the Philippine military, which receives much of its capital budget from the United States. If Aquino takes power one day, she too will need a healthy military to fend off the New People's Army.

It won't be an easy sell. Influenced by Rep. Stephen Solarz of New York, a tough Marcos critic, the House seems almost sure to cut off all but humanitarian aid to the Philippines in the wake of the electoral steal. In the Senate last week, Sam Nunn of Georgia, the ranking Democrat on the

Armed Services Committee, pressed for a curtailment of aid. Sen. Gary Hart of Colorado proposed putting aid into an escrow account until the Philippines has a legitimate government—and Sen. Majority Leader Robert Dole of Kansas called on the Pentagon to study alternatives to the U.S. bases at Clark Field and Subic Bay. With Nunn, a leader of conservative Democrats, and Dole, a leader of Reagan's own party, up in arms, the president is going to find it harder than ever to help the Philippines so long as Marcos stays in power.

HARRY ANDERSON with JOHN WALCOTT
and KIM WILLENSON in Washington and
MELINDA LIU and RICHARD VOKEY in Manila